

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Va'eira

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

25 Tevet, 5785

The Fax of Life

ת"סב

January 25, 2025

GOOD MORNING! Last week, as I sat and composed this column, I saw the breaking news regarding Israel's ceasefire agreement with Hamas. At this point, any steps toward finalizing something with the animals of Hamas is going to provide a very, very bittersweet sense of relief.

Once again, the outsized trading of many hundreds of murderous Hamas terrorist prisoners for the remaining 98 hostages – many of whom are either known or presumed to be dead – seems to be a capitulation to Hamas.

Moreover, it's going to be a painfully elongated process – over the next six weeks only 33 hostages are to be released (women and children, as well as men who are either sick, wounded, or over the age of 50), the rest will be negotiated for in a separate deal. Unsurprisingly, Hamas, a thoroughly evil entity, even ransoms bodies for live terrorists. In the words of Ronan Neutra, the grieving mother of Omer Neutra who died as a hostage in Gaza; "They use the bodies of dead hostages as negotiating chips."

Though thankful that, for some, this progress will provide a measure of closure, the entire Jewish nation is still dealing with the continuing repercussions from the horrors that began on the Shabbat and *Simchat Torah* of 5784, aka October 7, 2023. The devastating and lasting psychological impact to the survivors, hostages, and brave soldiers engaged in the ensuing war on three fronts – not to mention the ongoing suffering of **all** their families, friends, those living in Israel, and the Jewish nation at large – will resonate for many years, perhaps decades, to come.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people are no strangers to these kinds of devastating, life-altering tragedies. The history of the Jewish nation is sadly filled with equally (and more) horrific episodes; from last century's Holocaust, to the Cossacks under Khmelnytsky in 1648-49, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the horrors of the Crusades...these are but a few of the many tragedies that the Jewish people have endured in the last millennia alone.

One would rather expect some sort of a collective depression to grip the psyche of the Jewish people. While it is true that there have been many jokes about the fatalistic attitude of the Jewish people – it is not really an accurate portrayal of our people.

One of the more popular songs that for the last few decades has seemed to shape the collective psyche of Israeli Jews is an attitude that is attributed to the well-known mystic, Rabbi Nachman of Bratislav (April 4, 1772 – October 16, 1810). This ever-popular song reiterates, repeatedly, that it is a great *mitzvah* to always be happy.

This outlook on life was captured in the writings of his son Rabbi Natan: "For the nature of man is to pull himself towards black depression as a result of the vicissitudes and misfortunes of time, and every man is full of this affliction. As such, he must force himself with great strength to be joyful, always. He must therefore constantly focus on bringing himself to joy, even if it involves silliness" (*Likutey Moharan II*, 24:2) He actually begins this chapter with, "It is a great *mitzvah* to be happy always, and to empower oneself to distance the black depression with all one's strength."

To be perfectly honest, I never found it a compelling argument to merely tell a person suffering from depression to simply "try harder" to be happy and joyful. Instructing a person suffering from depression to bring himself momentary respite through any means, including "silliness" seems, at best, insufficient.

In this week's Torah portion we find an illuminating lesson; one that if properly internalized, can have a powerful impact on how we deal with our issues and perhaps even change how we interact and relate to others.

"And God spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and gave them a charge to the Children of Israel" (Exodus 6:13).

The Talmud (*Jerusalem Talmud Rosh Hashanah* 3:5) derives from this verse a fascinating teaching: Rabbi Shmuel, son of Rabbi Yitzchak, asked, "What did he (Moses) command the Children of Israel? He charged them with the Torah obligation (*mitzvah*) of freeing one's slaves." Quite remarkably, according to this sage, the very first *mitzvah* that the Almighty asked Moses to command the Jewish people as a nation was the obligation to free their slaves.

Why would the *mitzvah* of freeing one's slaves have the prominence of being the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish nation as a whole? There are other, seemingly more significant commandments like observing Shabbat or keeping kosher that would logically take precedence.

Furthermore, this was an oddly irrelevant commandment at the time. Since the nation was still in Egypt none of the Jews even had any slaves! Even more problematic; this law only applied once they arrived and settled in the Land of Israel – which turned out to be some 40 years later. Why charge them with a *mitzvah* that cannot even be fulfilled yet, and why give it the importance of being the first *mitzvah* they are commanded as a nation to fulfill?

As stated above, the overly simplistic attitude of striving to be happy all the time – or referring to it as a *mitzvah* – does not, to me at least, seem to be correct.

Everyone wants to be happy. In fact, many people mistakenly believe that their life goal should be "to be

happy.” I have even seen the Dalai Lama quoted as saying that “the purpose of our lives is to be happy.” While I have no idea in what context this was said (or if it was even said at all), it is an absolutely incorrect attitude.

Being happy is a description of a momentary state of being. At any particular moment a person may be happy, sad, angry, jealous, etc. These emotions are generally the result of a specific event or occurrence. Such transitory feelings cannot be the “purpose” of our lives. In fact, this attitude specifically contradicts the teaching of King Solomon, aka “the wisest of all men.”

In his magnum opus of philosophy, known as *Ecclesiastics*, he writes, “For all seasons there is a time for each and every action” (3:1). King Solomon continues, “A time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ibid 3:4). He goes on to give many such examples, “A time for building, a time for war, a time to distance, and a time to hug [...]”

King Solomon is, unsurprisingly, teaching us a profound axiom of life. Throughout our lives we will experience intense highs and lows – often within the same category. For example, having children is one of the most meaningful parts of life and can be a source of great joy. At the same time, the Torah **guarantees** that raising children will cause us to endure great pain (see *Genesis* 3:16 and Rashi ad loc). One of our school’s founders, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Berkowitz, OBM used to say, “Little kids don’t let you sleep. Big kids don’t let you live.”

What we must internalize from this teaching of King Solomon is that these experiences – both the joy and the pain – do not dictate who we are. Our job is to focus on living meaningful lives of accomplishment. A person who has a fulfilling life, one full of meaning and a certain sense of achievement, will reach a general sense of satisfaction with who they are. This leads to a sense of calm and a true peace of mind.

King Solomon is telling us that when bad things happen to us – and they absolutely will – we must understand that, for whatever reason, it is something we must experience. There is simply a calculus beyond our earthly knowledge as to why things happen. But we must view these experiences, both good and bad, as transitory moments in times.

We should therefore not internalize feelings or base our identity or even our perception of ourselves on them, as this can lead to depression. For instance, you might be frustrated or angry about failing a test, but that does not make you a failure or stupid. We need to understand that it is okay to embrace momentary feelings, but these presumptive and mistaken views about ourselves are merely illusory and fleeting. These feelings do not define us – rather we should focus on our actions as the true indicators of who we are.

This is why – after being slaves in Egypt for over 100 years – the first *mitzvah* given to the newly minted Jewish nation was that of freeing slaves, even though it’s a commandment that wouldn’t apply for another 40 something years. Often, a person suffering from an emotional trauma like abuse will abuse others to subconsciously feel better about himself. It’s a coping mechanism, and a way to begin to internalize that he is no longer a victim himself.

The Jewish people were being told that they were no longer slaves, and that, in fact, they too would have slaves one day. The ultimate test of being free is when you can let others have their freedom as well. In this way, their experiences as slaves would not define them. They understood that the slavery in Egypt was merely an experience they lived through – not a determination of who they were or would be.

TORAH PORTION: Va’eira, Exodus 6:2 - 9:35

Here is the story of the Ten Plagues, which God put upon the Egyptians not only to effect the release of the Jewish people from bondage, but also to show the world that He is the God of all creation and history. The first nine plagues are divisible into three groups: 1) the water turning to blood, frogs, lice 2) wild beasts, pestilence/epidemic, boils 3) hail, locust, and darkness.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that these were punishments measure for measure for afflicting the Jewish people with slavery: 1) The first of each group reduced Egyptians in their own land to the insecurity of strangers. 2) The second of each group robbed them of pride, possessions, and a sense of superiority. 3) The third in each group imposed physical suffering.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:30 Miami 5:40 Cape Town 7:38 Guatemala 5:39 Hong Kong 5:49 Honolulu 5:58 Jo’Burg 6:44 LA 4:57 London 4:21 Melbourne 8:21 Mexico 6:06 Moscow 4:28 New York 4:46 Singapore 7:00 Toronto 5:00

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you. — Carl Jung

In Memory of
Jimmy Cayne
Loving Husband, Father, and Grandfather



Shabbat Shalom,
Yitzchak Zweig
Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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